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New York State Senate Standing Committee on Social Services  
Senator Roxanne J. Persaud, Chair

New York State Senate Standing Committee on Women's Issues  
Senator Lea Webb, Chair

Safe Horizon's Testimony on  
The Experiences and Challenges Facing Domestic Violence Service Providers

October 3, 2023

Good morning and thank you, Chair Persaud and Chair Webb, for the opportunity to provide testimony before the Senate Standing Committees on Social Services and Women's Issues. My name is Jimmy Meagher, and I am Policy Director at Safe Horizon, the nation's largest non-profit victim services organization. Safe Horizon offers a client-centered, trauma-informed response to 250,000 New Yorkers each year who have experienced violence or abuse, and we acknowledge the many ways systemic racism impacts the lives of our clients and our staff.

Thank you for holding this important hearing. October is Domestic Violence Awareness Month, and it's critical that we work together to raise awareness about domestic and gender-based violence, ensure that survivors and their families can access the resources and supports they need, and ultimately prevent and end domestic violence. A future free of violence is possible, but it requires our collective will and our collective investment.

There are many challenges currently facing survivors and our community of domestic violence service providers. Today I'll be limiting my testimony to three main areas where we need our leaders in New York State government to lead:

1. Fully covering significant shortfalls in federal Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) funding for providers,
2. Ensuring a living wage for nonprofit human service workers and annual cost-of-living adjustments,
3. Expanding access to domestic violence shelter for single adults.

### **Fully Covering Significant Shortfalls in Federal VOCA Funding for Victim Services and Antiviolence Providers**

Victim services providers and antiviolence organizations across the country rely on many different federal funding streams to support and sustain our programs and services. One of the main funding sources that the sector relies on is the Victims of Crime Act, or VOCA. As part of VOCA, which became law in 1984, the Crime Victims Fund (CVF) was created as a non-taxpayer source of funding that supports the annual appropriation of funds for victim services. Today, VOCA funds nearly 6,500 victim services organizations across the country. Several years ago, deposits into the CVF began to significantly decline, forcing Congress to decrease the amount of funding released for VOCA. In large part due to our collective advocacy, Congress passed the VOCA Fix Act in 2021, and President Biden signed it into law. This law directed deposits from deferred prosecutions and non-prosecution agreements to the Crime Victims Fund. Although the VOCA Fix Act has helped, it has not led to an increase in deposits at the rate we need it to. Because deposits into the CVF are still lower than they were at their peak, VOCA continues to face cuts, which will ultimately lead to programs laying off staff, reducing services, or closing.

We are at a crisis point that requires both federal action and state action. The NYS Office of Victim Services (OVS) has been ringing the alarm bell for years. In New York, our federal VOCA grant has declined \$121.6 million in the past five years. As a result, OVS terminated their legal services contracts earlier than planned and then combined three separate contracts (victim services, case management services, and legal services) into one Request for Proposal. Organizations were instructed to determine their priorities, i.e., decide which programs and services to prioritize over

others, when responding to the RFA. Although we successfully advocated for the State to invest additional funding to make up for the shortfalls in VOCA funding, OVS awarded many new providers not previously contracted with OVS. It is wonderful that more organizations were awarded contracts, but this also led to legacy organizations like Safe Horizon seeing cuts to our contracts compared to our previous contracts. Nearly 90 organizations across the state suffered a decrease in funding, making it that much harder to sustain our core services for victims of violence and abuse.

OVS is still ringing the alarm bell and warning sub-grantees that it may not have the funding for the final year of our existing contracts. While we advocate with Washington, D.C. to find a more permanent, sustainable solution to this systemic national funding problem, New York State must invest state-originating dollars to make up these shortfalls. Other states, including Texas and Arizona, have found the necessary resources to keep critical victim services programs afloat, and we urge Governor Hochul to do the same in New York.

The Governor and our Legislature are focused on issues of public safety. The sustainability of the victim services and antiviolence sector **is** an issue of public safety. Our programs provide the supports and assistance survivors need. Our programs provide shelter, food, immediate financial support, and other essential safety needs. And our programs help survivors, their families, and their communities find healing. Public safety is not solely about law enforcement; public safety is about housing, economic security, access to healing, and so much more. Our state government must recognize this and use state revenues to support survivors and the safety net that organizations like ours provide.

### **Ensuring a Living Wage for Nonprofit Human Services Workers and Annual Cost-of-Living Adjustments**

The State of New York has relied heavily on the nonprofit human services sector to house, shelter, safety plan, and provide other critical services for survivors of violence. However, our government partners too often ask our community of nonprofits and community-based organizations to do more with less and to accept the bare minimum. This means that many - too many - nonprofit human services workers, the majority of whom are women and people of color, are barely surviving on the wages paid by underfunded contracts. Because many survivors come into victim services work to help other survivors, government funding for the nonprofit victim services sector is an economic justice issue for survivors. To live up to our shared values of equity, equality, and supporting communities, New York State must commit to ensuring a living wage floor on contracts and to fully funding annual Cost-of-Living Adjustments (COLA). We need New York State to fund state contracts at appropriate levels to allow non-profits and community-based organizations to offer competitive living wage salaries. Pay equity is a racial justice issue, a gender justice issue, and an economic justice issue.

The human services nonprofit sector is dealing with a sustainability crisis. Organizations across the sector continue to lose staff because wages are not comparable to wages in the government and private sectors. Hiring and staff retention continue to be major issues across the field. Vacancies and staff turnover directly impact our clients – survivors of domestic violence, runaway and homeless youth, and victims and survivors of violence and abuse across New York City. When

staff leave for a better paying job in the private, for-profit sector, our programs must reassign cases, which is disruptive to the survivors coming to us seeking safety and healing.

Safe Horizon is a proud member of the #JustPay campaign, which is a racial equity and gender justice campaign committed to ending the government exploitation of human services workers. The #JustPay campaign is demanding that sector employees under contract with New York State be paid fair wages for their labor.

Each year you hear from providers who are struggling due to the crisis of compounding underfunding of the human services sector as budgets are balanced on the backs of low-income neighborhoods and BIPOC communities. This practice has resulted in poverty-level wages for human services workers, who are predominantly women (66%) and people of color (68%). To address this crisis, we need our government partners to:

1. Establish, fund, and enforce an automatic annual cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) on all human services contracts, including for domestic violence advocates.
2. Set a living wage floor of no less than \$21 an hour for all State-contracted human services workers.
3. Create, fund, and incorporate a comprehensive wage and benefit schedule for government contracted human services workers comparable to the salaries made by State employees in the same field.

When we invest in the safety, healing, and well-being of individual New Yorkers, we invest in the safety, healing, and well-being of New York as a whole. Our sector continues to lose quality, caring, dedicated human services workers who are exhausted after years of the pandemic but can find less demanding and less emotionally draining work for more money. To ensure the continued viability of our sector and to treat our workforce fairly and equitably, New York State must fully fund contracted services and enable nonprofits to pay competitive and livable wages.

### **Expanding Access to Domestic Violence Shelter for Single Adults**

Across the State, but particularly in New York City, the emergency domestic violence shelter system was configured for families. Most rooms are designed to hold a family of two, three, or more. Single adults seeking safety in a domestic violence shelter, then, face significant obstacles in obtaining this life-saving resource.

Currently, the New York State Office for Children and Family Services (OCFS) reimburses non-profit domestic violence emergency shelter providers with a per-person, per-night rate. This reimbursement rate is intended to cover all costs associated with operating the shelter, including rent, utilities, staffing, insurance, and other programmatic costs. Any reduction in this reimbursement severely impacts a provider's ability to cover the operating costs of the shelter. OCFS says providers should downsize to accommodate singles, but providers cannot afford to do this in every case because of the way shelters are reimbursed. Domestic violence shelter providers face a major financial disincentive to downsize rooms intended for families to house single adults who are victims of domestic violence, human trafficking, and sexual assault. The current reimbursement structure makes it much more difficult for an individual survivor to access

emergency shelter and the trauma-informed services available there. Faced with this obstacle, survivors might otherwise remain in unsafe situations as a result.

This is why we strongly support state legislation, A. 2583/S. 15, which would require New York State to preserve the full reimbursement rate for providers who "downsize" a room configured for a family of two to accommodate a single adult individual. Domestic violence shelter providers who accommodate a single adult in a room designed for two individuals would receive a differential to preserve the existing per diem reimbursement rate. By removing the financial barrier for domestic violence shelter providers to house single adults, the bill will give greater access to domestic violence shelter to single adult victims of domestic violence, sexual abuse, and trafficking who otherwise face considerable obstacles to accessing the shelter system.

Safe Horizon operates New York City's 24-hour domestic violence hotline. Our Hotline advocates offer personalized, non-judgmental support to survivors of domestic and gender-based violence and provide safety planning and information about local resources. Our Hotline is also the centralized intake for survivors seeking emergency domestic violence shelter in New York City. Each year, the biggest category of individuals seeking domestic violence shelter are single adults with no children.

In 2020, about 49% of our hotline callers seeking shelter placement were single adults with no children, but we were only able to link 31% of these callers to shelter. By comparison, 27% of our hotline callers were from families of two (typically a mother and one child), and we were able to link 74% of these callers to shelter. Keep in mind, these numbers only refer to callers being linked to a provider for that provider's own intake and assessment, not callers actually being accepted into shelter, which is data Safe Horizon doesn't have access to.

In 2021, 31% of single clients who requested shelter were ultimately linked to shelter. In contrast, 76% of clients with 1 child, 78% of clients with 2 children, 73% of clients with 3 children, and 71% of clients with 4 or more children were ultimately linked to shelter. Whereas we had seen stability in percentages of clients linked to shelter across 2019-2021, 2022 data indicates it has gotten harder for families of all sizes to get linked to shelter, but single adults remain the hardest to link. Only 22% of single clients were linked to shelter in 2022, down from 31% in 2021.

So far in 2023, 18% of single clients who requested shelter were ultimately linked to shelter – down again from 2022, and significantly lower than in 2019-2021. In contrast, 71% of clients with 1 child, 66% of clients with 2 children, 57% of clients with 3 children, and 51% of clients with 4 or more children were ultimately linked to shelter. Since 2022, when it was harder for families of all sizes to access shelter, linkages for families with 1 or 2 children have started to recover, while linkages for singles and larger families have continued to drop.

By giving shelter providers greater financial flexibility to downsize a room meant for two people to accommodate a single adult, organizations will have increased capacity to shelter single adult survivors of domestic violence, trafficking, and sexual assault. Based on our data, this disproportionately impacts LGBTQ+ survivors, male survivors, and survivors with adult children (and are seeking to access shelter on their own).

## **Conclusion**

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today. Survivors and advocates desperately need the support of our elected leaders at all levels of government. We look forward to continuing our work alongside our New York State leaders to ensure a safer, more equitable, and more just future for all New Yorkers.

Thank you.